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"Be[ware] the Furrow of His Brow": "Miscuing" in Toni Morrison's Paradise

Although Toni Morrison's most recent book *Paradise* (1997) seems to be no exception in her literary output as regards the strategy of "miscuing," the sheer amount of detective work confronting the reader in his attempt to fill the gaps in the plot of this novel and fathom the nature of its rights and wrongs is truly remarkable. Referring to Toni Morrison's technique of "miscuing" in her aticle on *Sula*, one of her critics, Deborah E. McDowell, defines it as: "disappointing the very expectations the narrative arouses, forcing the reader to shift gears, to change perspective."[1] Hence, literally from the very first page of the book to the last the reader is beset by doubts of both moral and factual nature: he is not only left to wonder whether the victims are not themselves perpetrators but is also expected to unravel the mysteries behind their individual life stories on his own, as well as determine their racial identity, or solve the riddle of their miraculous disappearance into thin air at the end of the book.

What makes Morrison's technique of "miscuing" function particularly well in *Paradise* is the novel's loose episodic structure, which gives the reader no more than a glimpse at one character

[1] D.E. McDowell, "The Self and the Other: Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text," *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. N.Y. MacKay (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988) 85.

before moving on to another one, thus increasing the overall uncertainty of judgment and inviting contradictory interpretations. Not only is the plot of the novel a collection of fragmented and elliptical stories of five women who seek refuge from their particular traumas in a former convent, but they are set against the background of an equally fragmented and elliptical history of a traditionally respectable black community of Ruby, whose most righteous representatives go on a rampage one day to obliterate the five defenceless inmates of the Convent from the face of the earth. This deterioration of the community's moral standards finds its symbolic manifestation in a highly ambiguous act of defacing the Oven – the communal hearth – whose original God-fearing inscription "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" becomes the righteous-sounding "Be the Furrow of His Brow." Although the whole action of the novel is spanned by the single scene of the lynch-like murder in the worst Salem and Southern traditions, the perspectives the reader is made to assume as regards the felony in the initial and the final chapters of the book are as wide apart as are vice and virtue. Hence, described as: "Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary" (18)[2] in the first chapter, the Convent inmates assume the status of Mary's mothers: "Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (263) towards the end of the novel.

The introductory chapter, largely narrated from the third-person viewpoint of the perpetrators, abounds in ironies resulting from its clash with the objectivity of the chapter's omniscient narration, thus providing the disoriented reader with contradictory clues as to the right and the wrong of the murderous attack on the Convent. Moreover, it is not until the subsequent chapters, which tell the individual stories of the five Convent women, that

[2]T. Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Random House, 1999). This text refers to the paperback Vintage edition. All subsequent quotations from the book come from this edition.

the reader is allowed the privilege of forming his own independent judgement of character and fact, albeit those stories themselves abound in significant gaps only to be filled by the closing – untitled – chapter of the book, whose action follows the mysterious disappearance of the inmates. Hence, whatever knowledge of the five women's actual predicaments the reader acquires between the initial account of the act of murder and the final description of its details at the end of the novel is bound to considerably alter his judgement as to the distribution of vice and virtue in *Paradise*, although some of the questions the novel raises will invariably remain unanswered.

Paradise opens with a scene in the Convent where nine male representatives of the Ruby community are seen rummaging through the rooms of the mansion in search of their prospective victims. The chapter's title "Ruby," contrary to where its action actually takes place, seems to warn the reader against judging by appearances, in suggesting the geography of its viewpoint rather than location. And indeed, the judgement of the nine attackers is erroneous, even down to how far they outnumber their scapegoats, a fact which the reader discovers only at the end of the book, when trying to identify the casualties. Hence, while reading the first chapter he is hardly prepared to sift the wheat from the chaff for, with its pages densely interspersed with contradictory evidence, the chapter is the book's most glaring example of "miscuing."

Hence, the very association between an act of murder and the idea of a convent is revolting enough to shed an appropriately negative light on the nine attackers; however, the former convent is now merely a haven for the women abused in their families, and it still functions in the communal memory of Ruby as "an embezzler's folly" (3), originally built to satisfy the man's perverse tastes, whose tangible remnants were later removed by the outraged nuns. Moreover, instead of the evidence of "female malice"

(4), or "some . . . cult" (11), all that the nine men come across in the Convent's kitchen are unwashed jars from "last year's canning" (5) and a soup simmering on the stove, both indicative of the daily chores of the inmates having been interrupted by the sound of a gun. The infant booties and the teething ring, which the men take for a sign of the women's "sly torture of children" (8), in fact belong to the Convent-born baby boy of Pallas, the white girl whom they shoot first, while the nearest they come to finding any incriminating evidence of "the revolting sex" (8), allegedly practised in the Convent, are the therapeutic templates of human bodies drawn on the floor of the hall, each of them a poignant expression of its owner's emotional or physical hurt.

Furthermore, although perceived by their prospective annihilators as responsible for: "Four damaged infants . . . born in one family. . . . Brides [disappearing] on their honeymoons. Two brothers [shooting] each other on New Year's Day, etc." (11) – in the worst Salem tradition – the Convent women are at the same time seen by some other Ruby inhabitants as: "Strange neighbors . . . but harmless. More than harmless, helpful even on occasion. They took people in – lost folks or folks who needed rest" (11). In this remarkable maze of "miscuing" in the opening chapter of *Paradise* the clues are often to be sought in the least conspicuous places, one of them being "the fog that surrounded them to the hips" (18), or "the mist . . . waist high" (4), in which the attackers are seen wading in the Convent's garden as well as the alleged "witch tracks" (4) they discover there, all of which serve to disperse the reader's doubts as to where to draw the line between appearances and reality, the victims and the perpetrators.

The amount of hostility which the women of the Convent evoke in their victimisers on the opening pages of the book further contributes to the bafflement of the reader, who is thus on the lookout for the reasons behind this hostility, only to realise towards the end of the novel that, quite ironically although very appropri-

ately, five out of the nine culprits were in fact, in one way or another, either morally indebted or emotionally linked to the women they were attempting to annihilate. Hence, Jeff's wife, Sweetie, a distraught mother of children on the brink of death, had found shelter and comfort with the Convent women in a moment of crisis; Arnold Fleetwood's young daughter and K.D.'s girlfriend, Arnette, was delivered of her unwanted baby boy by K.D. in the Convent, where she was also allowed to leave the baby afterwards; Deacon's now dead son, Stuart, was miraculously brought back to life by Consolata's magic powers of "in-sight;" while Menus received the women's tender care in his hour of need; at the same time K.D. two-timed Arnette with Gigi, and Deacon his wife with Connie.

However, in a Toni Morrison novel such links are invariably subject to equivocation. Consequently, in her trauma and a state of fever Sweetie perceives her benefactors as ill-meaning buzzards she has seen over Ruby and hears babies cry while in the Convent; similarly, the traumatised and gult-ridden Arnette claims her dead child back on her wedding day, hurling charges of murder against the Convent inmates; on the other hand, Connie's gift of "in-sight" incriminates her as a "witch," although it ingratiates her with Deacon's wife, in spite of her former love affair with her husband. The balance of merits and equivocations related to the Convent women reveals the complexity of the underlying pattern of the novel not only as regards human relations but also their literary rendering.

Another aspect of *Paradise* which demands detective skills in its reader and is bound to puzzle him from the book's first page to its last is the conundrum of the racial identity of the Convent inmates. After finding out from the opening sentence of the book that "They shot the white girl first" (1) the reader is on the lookout for a racially mixed community in the town of Ruby only to learn well into the novel, from one of the new arrivals at the Con-

vent, that the only white man she saw in the town was at the gas station. From that point on, until the very last pages of the book, the reader is hardly allowed more than a glimpse at "brown fingers" (48), a "dark velvet face" (163), "smoky sundown skin," "tea-colored hair" (223), a "cinnamon . . . [hose] thought agreeable to black women's legs" (163) to single out from the company of five *the* white woman shot on the day of the raid. Ironically, the final and decisive clue of "wrists small as a child's" (289) has nothing to do with the colour of skin and only serves to frustrate a careless reader who has failed to notice that the "cinnamon" hose and the "dark velvet face" in fact belonged to another woman whose description briefly intercepted that of Pallas in the chapter devoted entirely to the white girl.

Not only is this a typically Morrisonian device intended, as the author herself puts it, "to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book,"[3] but it also serves, it seems, to obliterate the significance of race where moral choices are at stake. In that all-black community, which is enjoying its dearly paid-for stability and autonomy from white domination, blackness is taken for granted and thus becomes invisible, especially in view of the immediate absence of the white *other* and the immediate presence of the female *other* instead. Hence, with no white *other* in view, the black patriarchal community of Ruby allow themselves to lose grip on communal history, tradition and the impeccable moral standards of its "8-rock" Founding Fathers, and single out gender rather than race for their new *other*. What in fact provokes their hostility is any form of otherness – gender as much as unconventional conduct, unorthodox political views or shades of blackness other than its deepest hue of "8-rock."

[3]"Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. M. Evans (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1984) 341.

The life stories of the five Convent inmates are as much subject to "miscuing" as is their moral status or racial identity. Upon their introduction in the chapters bearing their names as titles, i.e. Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Consolata, each of the characters seems to be withholding some significant truth about themselves although this is not immediately apparent to the reader, who is, for the moment, given no more than one-sentence clues to their individual secrets, which become fully unravelled only in the last chapter.

With Mavis, a mother of four, whose twins die in consequence of her carelessness in leaving them locked in a car while shopping, the reader is left to wonder about the validity of the conviction that makes her subsequently abandon her other two children and run into safety from the threat which, as she insists, both her children and her husband present to her life. It takes her mother's warning that she will turn her in if Mavis does not stop harping on the subject, for the reader to see a traumatised psyche behind this maze of morbid suspicions. It is only in the closing chapter that he is given a hint as to the real nature of Mavis's trauma and the reasons for her suspiciousness: most probably her husband's sexual abuse of their daughter Sal. This discovery seems to shed dramatic light on Mavis allowing her twin girls – Merle and Pearl – suffocate in her Cadillac, in the manner of Sethe, it seems, who killed Beloved to save her from slavery.

It is in a similar way that Seneca's true story unfolds. The incomplete picture of her trauma that emerges from her childhood memory of having been abandoned by her sister, Jean, evokes Mavis's sound observation that sisters do not act that way. The reader's suspicion aroused by her remark is confirmed in the final chapter of the novel, when he finds out that Jean was neither Seneca's sister nor cousin but her young mother of fourteen, who abandoned her to foster parents in order to get married.

And finally, Gigi (Grace), set apart from the rest of the Convent women by her promiscuity and therefore unequivocally poor reputation in Ruby, is in fact yearning for romantic love and devotion clearly visible in her enormous fascination with the stories of two inseperable lovers in an Arizona desert or a couple of trees with their trunks intertwined forever, which she hears from two of her seducers. What puzzles the reader are the reasons behind Gigi's promiscuity and her inclinations towards exhibitionism, considering her young age, relative naivety and sensitivity to the suffering of others. Her recurrent traumatic memory of a blood stain on the white shirt of a young rioter hardly connects with her other trauma related to her father's gift of a heart locket with two photos inside, which she confesses to having thrown into the Gulf of Mexico. Although the connection is never as much as hinted at, towards the close of the book it turns out that Gigi's father is in prison for life and that she lies to him when he asks about the locket. Hence the questions that force themselves on the reader's mind: Is Grace (significantly, named after her mother) a victim of her father's sexual abuse? Was the boy indeed merely a stranger to her? What felony did her father commit if he had been sentenced to death before the reprieve came?

The ultimate riddle with which the reader is faced in *Paradise* has to do with the mysterious disappearance of the five inmates, following the attack on the Convent. With two of the women – Pallas and Consolata – apparently dead, no corpses are found, no culprits wanted, no responsibility borne. If it were not for the resultant change in the communal mentality, the lynch might never have taken place. Once more resorting to "miscuing," Toni Morrison ends her book on an ambiguous note, which puts to question the validity of the opening sentence of *Paradise:* "They shot the white girl first." Namely, Pallas, the white girl, with her baby boy strapped on to her, is seen in the company of Mavis, Grace and Seneca, whose safe escape from the scene of murder has never

been questioned. They are all revisiting the very premises and people whose memories they used to be haunted by. Predictably enough, all four scenes are saturated with "miscuing" and have a dream-like aura about them – Mavis's daughter Sal does not remember her mother paying their restaurant bill; Pallas's mother cannot produce a single sound upon seeing her, as in a state of a dream; Gigi's father is surprised that her presence goes completely unnoticed by the prison guards. Nevertheless, what assures the reader of the tangibility of those scenes rather than make him speculate about their illusiveness is the spiritual healing and reconciliation they involve as well as a sharp contrast they form with the final scene of the novel set in Paradise – an all-female pieta – in which a younger woman – apparently Consolata – receives "solace" from an older one, most definitely her beloved and recently deceased foster mother and the former mother superior of the Convent, Mary Magna.

"Miscuing" in *Paradise* does not only refer to the private world of the five Convent inmates and their relationships with the individual members of the town of Ruby but also to the public world of that all-black community and its relations with the all-female community of the Convent. An ominous parallel drawn between the Convent and a coven – a witch sabbath – by a Ruby inhabitant, ironically, raises the question of another such parallel between the Convent and the Oven, the former word containing the latter in verbal terms, and both centred around the idea of a hearth, both assertions of freedom and identity in their own worlds which threatened to smother them – the world of gender and the world of race, respectively.

The final ambiguity of the novel, which must not be overlooked in this context, is related to the controversy in the community of Ruby over restoring the original version of the inscription on the Oven, i.e. "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" to replace what has remained of it, i.e. "Be the Furrow of His Brow." Mor-

rison's "miscuing" results in two apparently exclusive interpretations of the inscription. In one of them its present form might suggest a deterioration of the traditional moral standards of the community , which eventually led to the righteous attack on the Convent. On the other hand, however, it is Ruby's young generation, which had nothing to do with the lynching, that protests against reinstalling the former version, on the grounds that since it was originally addressed to those whites and mulattoes who had "disallowed" the "8-rock" founding families of Ruby (then Haven), it serves to define the latter in relation to whites and the trauma of slavery rather than their authentic African background, which they see as asserted in the new version of the inscription. Through her technique of "miscuing" Morrison condones this view by making the most righteous individuals of Ruby imitate their white oppressors in going on a rampage to the Convent, thus defining themselves in terms of their enslaving past rather than the liberating future, which, as she seems to insist, lies in falling back upon their African roots in order to assert their separate racial identity and independence of judgement.